

## History of North Presbyterian Church

We have a grand 168-year history, beginning in Buffalo, but this year (2015) we are celebrating 60 years in Williamsville. On June 5, 1955, the cornerstone of a new home for North Presbyterian Church was laid at 300 North Forest Road and on December 8, 1955, the first worship service was celebrated in the current sanctuary.

The population of Buffalo grew rapidly in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century, especially after the completion of the Erie Canal in 1825. Between 1832 and 1845, three Presbyterian churches were in existence within the city of Buffalo: First Presbyterian, Central, and Lafayette. By 1846, these three churches were overflowing on Sunday mornings, and it was perceived that another church was needed. So, on March 25, 1847, 20 men and 23 women, all members of First Presbyterian Church, agreed to “enter upon a new enterprise.” The site chosen for the new church was on Main Street between Tupper and Chippewa, near the current location of Studio Arena Theatre. The name “North” was chosen because, at that time, the location seemed quite far to the north of the other Presbyterian churches. This new church was dedicated on December 29, 1847.

When North Church celebrated its 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary in 1897, Buffalo was a thriving city of 170,000, with fifteen railroads and 1137 manufacturers. Large residential areas were established farther to the north, east, and west of Delaware Avenue. By 1900, the Session and members realized that North church could no longer survive downtown and voted to move northward toward the center of the newly emerging residential communities. Ground was broken for construction of a new North Presbyterian Church at the corner of Utica Street and Delaware Avenue, and the new building was dedicated on January 6, 1907.

By the mid-1930s, a number of changes in the community brought about a significant decline in membership. For example, a large number of Presbyterian churches existed within a relatively constrained geographic area; the Great Depression had a catastrophic effect upon membership, with many formerly self-sufficient and wealthy members facing bankruptcy; and World Wars I and II brought about many social and economic changes, including gasoline rationing, which affected the ability of certain church locations to draw new membership. As a result of these conditions, when Rev. Martyn Keeler became pastor in 1950, North Church faced seemingly insurmountable financial difficulties and dwindling membership.

On Sunday, October 12, 1952, a small group of individuals met in the home of Warren and Alice Swager, newcomers to the village of Williamsville. The Swagers had great concern over the lack of a Presbyterian church to serve Williamsville and the surrounding communities. The group showed tremendous interest and a willingness to devote time and energy to the establishment of a Presbyterian church in Williamsville. As Secretary, pro-tem, of the group, Mr. Swager wrote a letter to the Session of North Church stressing the urgent need for a Presbyterian Church in Amherst. This invitation was accepted by North Church, and its building at Delaware and Utica was closed on December 31, 1952.

Finding itself without a permanent building on January 1, 1953, the congregation of North Church met for worship in the cafeteria of Park School, which was located on Harlem Road in Snyder. The Park School congregation grew, attracting new members from the Town of Amherst. On May 24<sup>th</sup> of that year, the congregation approved the purchase of the Kuhn farm at North Forest and Union Roads in Williamsville. Ground was broken for a new church building—the third in the church’s history, and on December 8, 1955, the church was dedicated. That site remains the current location of North Presbyterian Church.

In summary, over the past 160 years (1847-2007), North Presbyterian Church has been located at three different locations and its congregation has been led by 31 pastors, interim pastors, and/or assistant and associate pastors. Two of these pastoral callings (Revs. Keeler and McFarlane) each extended over a 20-year period. The membership of the congregation is currently around 660 individuals.

During the month of October, 2005, NPC celebrated with joy its fifty years in its third location. Among the things celebrated included the following:

- completion of the Keeler Chapel named in honor of Rev. Keeler
- completion of the fellowship hall, named Westminster Hall
- welcoming of community groups including the Boy Scouts
- many mission activities, including Habitat for Humanity and Friends of Night People
- superb maintenance of our property by talented and dedicated members

- achievements of our youth and the many youth-oriented missions
- joy of our songs and bell choirs, soloists, and dance group
- humble satisfaction of pastoral caring for seniors and others
- many fellowship activities of the church, including picnics and evening programs
- satisfaction for many problems solved and tasks well done
- a congregation willing to experiment with new forms of worship and ministry.

### **Extra**

The Reverend Thaddeus Osgood arrived in the village of Buffalo in late February 1812. As a representative of the Massachusetts Missionary Society for Propagating the Gospel, he conducted religious services for the early settlers who were, for several years, without an ordained clergyman. In the absence of a consecrated building, his services, including baptisms, were held in Joseph Landon's waterfront tavern which served as a community center and a hostelry. Under Mr. Osgood, ten persons organized the First Presbyterian Church, the first church in Buffalo. Comfort Landon, the tavern keeper's wife, was among them. Mr. Landon was denied membership. At that time the Presbytery of Geneva prohibited anyone who sold alcoholic beverages from receiving communion.

The first church was erected on the Lake Erie waterfront. During the War of 1812, the village of Buffalo was burned, forcing the settlers to flee to Williamsville. The new church was almost destroyed by fire. The building was restored in 1815 and was received by the Presbytery of Geneva on February 14, 1816.

In 1832 Buffalo was elevated from village to city status, and First Presbyterian church grew in membership. Two additional churches stemmed from First Presbyterian. They were Pearl Street Presbyterian Church, subsequently Central, in 1835, and Lafayette Presbyterian Church in 1845. Both churches serve the Buffalo area today.

By 1846 these three churches were overflowing on Sunday mornings and it was perceived that another church was needed. On March 25, 1847, twenty men and twenty-three women, all members of First Presbyterian Church, agreed to "enter upon this new enterprise." The site chosen for the new church was on Main Street between Tupper and Chippewa, near the current location of Studio Arena Theatre. The name "North" was chosen because, at that time, the location seemed quite far to the north. North Presbyterian Church was dedicated to the Glory of God on December 29, 1847.

The 57-year-old church was sold in January, 1904. The last service was held on April 17 of the same year. The following Sunday, worship took place at the Twentieth Century Club on Delaware Avenue. After May 7, 1905, services were held at Temple Beth Zion, also on Delaware Avenue.

Ground was broken for construction of the new North Presbyterian Church at the corner of Utica Street and Delaware Avenue. It was dedicated on January 6, 1907. Traditions, worship, and program continued as they had before. At one point in time, North Church had the largest membership of all the Presbyterian churches in Buffalo

By the mid-1930s a number of changes in the community brought about a significant decline in membership. There were seven Presbyterian churches within one mile, and the Delaware Avenue Baptist Church was directly across the street. The 1930s depression had a catastrophic effect on the membership. Many formerly self-sufficient and wealthy members faced bankruptcy or poverty and were forced to severely reduce or eliminate their tithes and offerings. World War II also brought about many social and economic changes. With gasoline rationing, many suburban dwellers attended nearby churches, some within walking distance.

The Reverend Martyn Keeler became pastor in 1950. During the early years of his pastorate, seemingly insurmountable problems plagued the church and its dwindling membership. There were fewer than thirty children in Sunday School and it was becoming financially impossible to support the pastor and maintain the property, which was then in need of repair.

On October 16, 1952, Mr. Keeler announced that the church at Delaware and Utica had been sold. The front door closed on December 31, 1952.